

Los Alamos

NATIONAL LABORATORY

memorandum

Director's Office

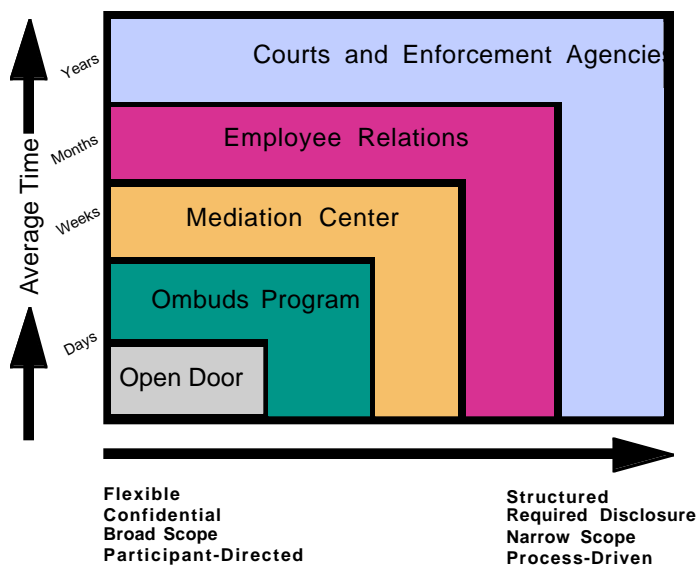
To/MS: All Employees
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Symbol: DIR
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Subject: Work-Related Problem Solving and Conflict

Resolution Resources

A vital aspect of any organization is its ability to foster a comfortable and open atmosphere in which to effectively resolve problems and conflicts. Our goal is to provide a conflict management system with sufficient flexibility to respond to the wide variety of situations that inevitably arise. Whenever possible, we want to empower employees, both managers and nonmanagers, to deal with problems and conflicts themselves. The majority of problems that arise in our workplace should be resolved by those directly affected or with the immediate supervisor (the "open door" concept). At this level, issues can be addressed informally before they escalate to stages where others must be involved. As illustrated by the chart below, the more formal the approach, the greater the time spent in resolution as the processes become more structured.

PROBLEM/CONFLICT RESOLUTION OPTIONS



Sometimes, though, we need assistance in solving problems. To create a more effective system of communication and conflict management, we have established two new resources, the Ombuds Program and the Employee Relations Mediation Center. These are designed to complement other existing employee assistance resources. For those who are not certain about where to go for help, the Ombudsman is the first choice for assistance or for information about other resources. For those who have an issue that would be subject to grievance or administrative review, the Mediation Center provides an opportunity to resolve the issue before filing a formal complaint with the Employee Relations Group in the Human Resources Division.

Laboratory Ombuds Program

The concept of a *workplace* ombudsman (or woman) has been evolving in this country since the 1970s and has come to mean a *designated neutral* within an organization who provides informal and confidential assistance in resolving work-related conflicts and problems. As many of you know from previous communications, I have selected Bruce MacAllister to head the Laboratory Ombuds Program. At the Laboratory, the role of Ombudsman is to listen, provide and receive information, suggest referrals, and help develop options for resolving conflicts or concerns. While the Ombudsman may assist through various dispute resolution techniques, the emphasis is on exploring ways for people to help themselves. All members of the Laboratory workforce, including managers and special employment program participants, have access to the Ombudsman.

Both the Ombudsman's neutrality and his placement in the Director's Office are designed to preserve his independence and to enhance the effectiveness of the program. He will bring any general trends

and suggestions for improvements to my attention, but will not report his interactions with individuals to me. Only statistical records are maintained, without names, to identify trends and utilization demographics; no formal "case records" are kept. The Ombudsman's effectiveness is further enhanced by the high level of confidentiality afforded to those who use the services of the program. To the maximum extent provided by law, issues brought to the Ombudsman are treated with strict confidentiality. No action is taken or disclosure of information is made without the permission of the person bringing the concern. Exceptions to confidentiality may occur only when disclosure is ordered by an appropriate legal authority, such as a court, or when there is reason to believe that failure to disclose information could result in serious harm to a person or to property.

The Ombuds Program does not replace other Laboratory assistance organizations such as the ESH-2 Employee Assistance Program, Employee Relations, or the Internal Evaluation Office. For example, the Ombudsman is not the official point of contact for placing the Laboratory on notice regarding alleged incidents of sexual harassment or fraud, waste, and abuse of government resources because communications with the Ombudsman are confidential (subject to the exceptions noted above). However, these issues can be discussed with the Ombudsman and, with consent of individual raising the allegation, reported to the appropriate office through the Ombudsman.

A brochure will soon be distributed that describes the Ombuds Program in greater detail. The Ombuds office is located at 974 17th Street in Central Park Square in downtown Los Alamos (665-2837).

The Employee Relations Mediation Center

For employees who have work-related concerns involving human resources issues and who have not been able to resolve the concern by talking directly with their supervisor, the Mediation Center offers a collaborative approach to problem solving that can prevent or minimize the escalation of disputes by resolving them in an expeditious, cost effective, and mutually acceptable manner. Karen Walterscheid, who heads this program, offers a variety of alternative dispute resolution techniques, including structured mediation, with the goal of resolving complaints before they become formal grievances or administrative reviews. Participation is voluntary for all parties, and the time for filing a formal complaint is suspended during the mediation period. The Mediation Center is located at Canyon Complex (667-9367).

The Laboratory's institutional Guiding Principles state that "we develop and sustain a diverse, creative, and productive workforce" and "treat our coworkers, customers, and stakeholders with integrity, honesty, and respect." I believe the Ombuds Program and the Mediation Center can support these principles by helping to build the kind of fair and equitable workplace we strive continually to achieve. We all know that conflicts, uncertainty, confusion, and real and apparent barriers are inevitable in any complex enterprise. But, if handled with good will and respect for the interests of all parties, many problems we encounter can have a positive aspect, resulting in innovative solutions, improved productivity and teamwork, and a deeper level of trust.

I fully support these new resources for employees. I urge all of you to use them when you believe you have a need for the kind of assistance the programs provide.

In closing, I want to acknowledge the efforts of the employees who contributed their time and ideas to the development of these programs, particularly the efforts of the Employee Advisory Council. My thanks to all who participated.

SSH:BJM:RT:vlm

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